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ABSTRACT

The process model of reading suggests that even the effective reader makes recurring regressions to lower levels of functioning when faced with unfamiliar topics or texts. The gradual formulation of new linguistic and cognitive structures necessitated by the task of reading is similar to the acquisition of language, and the process model suggests that the learner moves through a number of stages before gaining fluency. To foster the smooth progression from initial gross processing to full comprehension and fluency, the reader needs conditions that allow full functioning of cognitive and linguistic structuring. Creating a learning climate requires a shift more in philosophy than in method or selection of materials. The tripartite approach of modelling, practice, and expanded feedback can be fitted into most existing programs. The most important aspect is to have, and to create for the student, an awareness of the gradual nature of learning generally and reading comprehension in particular. (TJ)

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USING A PROCESS MODEL AS A GUIDE TO COLLEGE/ADULT READING INSTRUCTION

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Introduction

A review of the literature of college/adult reading reveals a wealth of well-designed instructional procedures and programs. Many of them are the result of careful attention to the needs of changing student populations. Yet few move beyond ad hoc problem solving and a focus on the development of discrete skills. There are programs based on the tenets of behavior modification (Himmelstein & Greenberg, 1974; Hornstein, 1970; Rankin, 1973; Reid, 1971) and on principles of humanistic psychology (Greene, 1974; Paul, 1974; Sherk & Manzo, 1973; Wilson, 1972). But there appear to be few programs designed specifically to consider the processes used by the effective adult reader.

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There is little disagreement about the dynamic nature of reading and the fact that development continues beyond the acquisition of a set of skills. The effective reader continues to expand his ability to deal with texts of varying style and content. But in order to accommodate novel materials he makes recurring regressions to lower levels of functioning. At this point there does not appear to be a model that describes the processes the effective reader uses when dealing with unfamiliar or difficult texts. The purpose of this paper is to propose such a model and to discuss its implications for instruction.

A Process Model of Adult Reading

Each time a reader encounters texts in styles or on topics unfamiliar to him he must internalize new linguistic and cognitive structures. In other words, he is faced with a task similar to learning a language. Both the child learning his mother tongue and the adult plunged into a foreign milieu must formulate new concepts and internalize the linguistic structures to describe them. The reader attempting to learn the mini-language of an unfamiliar text is faced with the same task. The assumption here is that he will use processes similar to those of the language learner to gain fluency. Accordingly, in the absence of case studies of adult reading development, the literature of psycholinguistics and of cognitive psychology has been used to derive the process model of adult reading presented here (See Figure 1).

(Insert Figure 1 about here)

Communication stands at the heart of the model and interacts with all of its facets. However, before fluency is achieved, the learner moves through a number of levels. Depending upon his prior experience with the topics and language of the text he will linger at the periphery or move quickly to the induction of rules and the integration of the various aspects.

The lowest level constitutes a data gathering stage which is marked by initial gross performance. Reading is not a process of piecing together an intricate mosaic of many individual pieces. Instead, it is akin to the development of a photographic plate where gross outlines emerge first and fine details develop later. The general topic and organization are perceived before there can be an appreciation of the subtleties of the text. If the reader has little or no experience with the material, he will search for concrete data in his own experience or the text before moving to more abstract levels of processing. At times, he may have to consult texts written in more concrete terms before being able to deal with abstract concepts of a field.

Instructors in reading centres are well aware of the data gathering stage of reading. They have observed how meaning accrues gradually as their students struggle with unfamiliar reading tasks. In literary analysis, the inexperienced reader moves from a retelling of the plot to descriptions of characters and events before he is able to engage in inferential reading or the analysis of theme or style. When dealing with abstract texts, the reader attempts to relate the information to his prior, more concrete knowledge and translates the unfamiliar terminology into more familiar language.

As in language learning, the move to higher levels of processing and the induction of rules requires active practice on the part of the learner. Patterns of language and thought are internalized gradually.. As they are consolidated, the reader becomes more effective in projecting ahead and selecting the right cues for effective reading. The presentation of rules or theorems cannot replace the processes of assimilation and accommodation in establishing the cognitive and linguistic schemata that will make for fluency.

The full integration of the linguistic and conceptual structures of a text constitutes the final move toward fluency. As the reader joins the components of the text and integrates them into his own conceptual framework the need to translate disappears and direct communication becomes established. This final step toward fluency is generally based on the learner's own initiative. Instruction may aid the process, but only the learner can fit the new structures into his own cognitive network.

While the independent, effective learner uses the holistic processes described here, reading instruction frequently runs counter to the move from the whole to parts and from the concrete to the abstract. Attention to the fine details of the text is stressed and accuracy rather than gross performance is expected on reading tests requiring a one-time perusal. Abstract theories and rules are presented to guide students in dealing with components of reading. If instruction is to foster the effective functioning of the learner's own processes, a shift may be needed in the overall approach to program development.

How to Foster Reading Development

The recurring regressions the reader makes to accommodate new materials have been likened here to learning mini-languages; hence, the conditions that foster language learning in non-institutional settings are of interest.

The child acquiring his mother tongue is eminently successful, and second-language learners immersed in a foreign milieu generally attain better fluency than their school-trained counterparts. In both instances, the data gathering stage is well supported by the learning environment. The learner is surrounded by whole language in concrete settings. No one expects initial accuracy of performance, and the learner is left to evolve his skills gradually.

In these non-institutional settings the teaching-learning process rests on three prime components: 1) The provision of models to emulate; 2) extensive practice on the part of the learner; 3) feedback that acknolweldges the content of the learner's message and expands its form. The climate for learning is one of openness and trust. The learner feels safe to test his evolving skills, and his teachers display confidence in his ability to upgrade his initial efforts. Ideally, a learning centre should provide this type of climate and base instruction on the three prime components cited above.

Providing Models to Emulate

Reading instruction in institutional settings is generally based on explaining discrete skills. Without having the overall picture clearly in mind, the learner attempts to piece together a highly intricate mosaic. While individual skills may be acquired, learners often fail to move to the level of pattern formation , the induction of rules, or the integration of the materials read. In order to establish a solid data bank to serve as a foundation for higher levels of functioning, the learner needs models of behaviours that present an overview of what is aimed for.

Using the students' own textbooks or closely related materials at a lower, more concrete level, instructors can demonstrate reading and study behaviours incorporating the allied skills of writing, listening, and reasoning. For some students, fluent oral reading of poetry and prose

may be essential as a guide to effective reading. Audio tapes can supplement personal demonstrations. In conjunction with textbook study, the art of formulating questions requires many concrete examples. It simply is not enought to tell students about turning headings or topic sentences into questions. Thinking aloud while moving through a chapter with students will serve as a model for in-depth analysis and the sifting of ideas. Similarly, literary analysis requires that the instructor reveal how or why he reaches certain interpretations.

Writing at all levels lends itself well to modelling. Here, as with reading, it becomes important to demonstrate that gross processing precedes fine discrimination in order to disspell the notion that a once-over-lightly treatment is all that is required. Students need to become aware that instructors, too, refine their work gradually in both reading and writing. To aid the modelling process, samples of essays and reports including rough notes and early drafts should be on file in the learning centre. Examples of varying types of sentences, paragraphs, and organization will serve students far better than the perennial exercises in classifying and/or correcting faulty writing.

Content-area instructors, too, can serve as models in the learning centre. There is no suggestion here that reading specialists be knowledgeable in all areas. In fact, all they need to do is model learning behaviour. If a text is difficult, the modelling will reveal the groping for familiar or concrete clues or patterns to aid the gradual move toward full comprehension. Peer models can supplement the work of the specialists.

Making Room for Practice

Instructors are well familiar with students' plaints about having to read chapters several times. The need for sustained practice and gradual improvement so thoroughly ingrained in athletic activities is

not perceived when it comes to reading, writing, or thinking skills. To be effective, a learning centre must provide a climate that makes it safe for students to practice their emerging skills over a period of time. Instructors need to reassure students that repetition is not a matter of slow or faulty progress but a vital part of all learning. The need for active involvement of the learner in the formation of cognitive structures is well established for early learning. Somehow it seems to be lost on college students and needs to be inculcated.

Providing Expanded Feedback

In language learning the focus rests squarely on communication. Parents or peers will acknowledge the content of the initial haulting efforts of the learner and at the same time provide feedback that expands the incomplete or incorrect statement. Thus the teacher reinforces communication and provides a model of correct forms of speech. In educational settings the opposite course is frequently followed. Feedback usually refers to faulty structures, spelling, or punctuation and often fails to acknowledge the content of the student's work.

When using the process model as a guide to instruction, there is a shift to content-centered responses in discussions of student's interpretations of texts. The use of expanded feedback lends itself well to both textbook reading and literary analysis. As the student provides brief or incomplete statements about the text, the instructor acknowledges the message and expands its form. In such an exchange the instructor, like the parent in the home, stays just enough ahead of the learner to aid the upgrading process without making too large a stride for the learner.

Summary

The process model of reading suggests that even the effective reader makes recurring regressions to lower levels of functioning when faced with unfamiliar topics or texts. The gradual formulation of new linguistic and cognitive structures necessitated by the the task of reading is likened to the acquisition of mini-languages and the model suggests that the learner moves through a number of stages before gaining fluency. To foster the smooth progression from initial gross processing to full comprehension and fluency, the reader needs conditions that allow the full functioning of his own cognitive and linguistic structuring. The suggestions provided here for creating a learning climate require a shift in philosophy more than in method or selection of materials. The tripartite approach of modelling, practice and expanded feedback can be fitted into most existing programs. The important aspect is to have - and to create for the student - an awareness of the gradual nature of learning generally and reading comprehension in particular.

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Figure 1

A PROCESS MODEL OF COLLEGE/ADULT READING